Poetry and diplomacy: Telling it slant

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The study looks at some defining similarities and differences between poetry and diplomacy. It shows that both pursuits make extensive use of underspecification and illustrates how each deploys a variety of shared tropes, from ambiguity to metaphor, neologisms and parataxis. Despite these similarities in language, the reasons for resorting to implicit communication differ significantly, with only one exception – redress. Redress, which is the attempt to find a counterbalance to anomalies and injustices, requires the ability to keep two or more potentially conflicting views in mind. The article concludes that ambivalence is a necessary attribute of both a poet and a diplomat and that well-judged ambiguity is an essential vehicle for redress.

KEYWORDS: *diplomacy, poetry, ambiguity, language and thought, redress, communication*

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1. INTRODUCTION

The first issue of *Training Language and Culture* cites these words of Dr Johnson on its front cover: *'Language is the dress of thought'*. In this article, I consider whether there are any significant similarities in the language and thinking of two seemingly very different pursuits, poetry and diplomacy. I start by asking whether poets and diplomats make use of the same linguistic resources. I then consider how similarities in dress may obscure differences in thought and conclude that the most significant commonality between poetry and diplomacy lies as much in their power of redress as in their dress.

2. LANGUAGE

2.1 General remarks

Poetry is often considered difficult, and diplomacy duplicitous, because the language they use is so inscrutable. In an age of KISS (Keep it Simple, Stupid), clear writing and a popular distrust of experts, complexity and ambiguity are viewed with distrust. Yet multiplicity of meaning can be an advantage, not least in being less binary and binding than the black and white of literal language – assuming, that is, that literal language is itself transparent (Empson, 1930; Bernstein, 1976; Scott, 2001). This section looks at examples of the intentional use of underspecification – those areas of language that most readily give rise to multiple interpretations – in both poetry and diplomacy.

2.2 Ambiguity

Poets and diplomats seem to make a virtue of 'telling it slant'. As Emily Dickinson (1998) puts it:

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Tell all the truth but tell it slant –
Success in Circuit lies
...
The Truth must dazzle gradually
Or every man be blind –

In poetry, multiple meanings give rise to richer readings, all of which can potentially co-exist. This is evident in the Dickinson extract where all the substantive words are open to interpretation: how does one tell the truth slant and at what point does a slant truth stop being a truth and become something else, such as a white lie or fake news? What constitutes a *Circuit*, and does one (should one) always come back to the point of departure, as the word suggests? Might there even be a connotation of *running circles round others or of winding someone round one's little finger?* What justifies the presupposition that truth is blinding, and how should we understand the divergent connotations of the verbs to *blind* and to *dazzle*?

Questions such as these, and many others like them, give rise to valuable reflections.
In diplomacy, so-called *constructive ambiguity* similarly allows one and the same piece of language to accommodate two or more divergent positions.

A canonical example is to be found in the wording of the 1972 Shanghai Communiqué jointly signed by the United States and the People's Republic of China, which affirms that there is only *'One China'*, despite there being two governments with claims to that status: the People's Republic of China and the Republic of China. The wording of the communiqué, in not specifying the political status of the Republic of China, leaves it to the Chinese on either side of the Taiwan Strait to resolve their dispute among themselves while also leaving the choice open for other countries to make, with the result that some countries have diplomatic ties with the People's Republic of China and others with the Republic of China, but never both (Shanghai Communiqué, 1972):

'The United States acknowledges that all Chinese on either side of the Taiwan Strait maintain there is but one China and that Taiwan is a part of China. The United States Government does not challenge that position. It reaffirms its interest in a peaceful settlement of the Taiwan question by the Chinese themselves.'

Ambiguity of referent is also evident in the phrase *socialism with Chinese characteristics*, which has acted as an umbrella term for very diverse principles, policies and priorities over the last half century, while implying that a common identity and nationalism nevertheless underlies these characteristics (Li, 1995, p. 586).

Although the discussion so far has suggested that ambiguity is an asset in enriching possibilities and

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providing room for manoeuvre, not all ambiguity is necessarily constructive to all parties at all times. This final example of ambiguity combines poetry and foreign policy in the form of Deng Xiaoping's 24-character strategy, a series of guidelines for the Party following his death (Keith, 2018). Deng's recommendations read like a poem, written in regular four-character phrases which echo both a traditional style of Chinese poetry as well as the *chengyu*, or proverb (Yip, 1997):

'Observe calmly; secure our position; cope with affairs deeply; hide our capacities and bide our time; be good at maintaining a low profile; and never claim leadership.'

One line in particular has provoked controversy, namely *taoguang yanghui*, which literally means *hide brightness, nourish obscurity* but has been translated as *hide our capacities and bide our time* (Huang, 2011; Chen & Wang, 2011). The importance of this expression to the Chinese government is reflected in the fact that it became the official title for Chinese foreign policy, and several speeches and articles promoting *taoguang yanghui* indicate the pride and determination that drives this policy. The American reaction to this phrase, in contrast, was one of deep suspicion. Informed by a history of mutual distrust, Americans inferred that those prospective actions would most likely be detrimental to the interests of the U.S. The Chinese public were roused to anger by those self-same words, reading in them an appeal to hold back and lie low rather than stand up and be counted among the leading nations of the world. China's *'century of humiliation'* at the hands of Western powers was the determining frame of reference for the Chinese man in the street. For a casual observer, however, nothing much makes sense in either the form or content of this policy guideline. Thus, a single four-character expression managed to elicit at least four distinct reactions: pride, distrust, anger and, where the general foreign public is concerned, perplexity. In ambiguity, as in metaphor – discussed next – frames of reference are instrumental in priming particular interpretations.

2.3 Metaphor and connotations

In the *taoguang yanghui* example, ambiguity arises from the use of a metaphor that can be characterised as LIGHT is VISIBILITY, and is exemplified in English by such expressions as *to be in the spotlight, to seek the limelight, to hide one's light under a bushel,* and to be *a shining*

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example. Since all these connotations are positive, we might indeed ask why Deng Xiaoping would have advised against seeking the light. It is highly unlikely that Deng was advocating backwardness, and since enhanced visibility is ambiguous in that it can reveal flaws and draw potentially negative attention, we must conclude that he was advocating caution.

Metaphors are always difficult to translate, not least because they do not carry the same values and cultural significance across different languages. In this case, the sense of waiting until one is ready was translated into an expression with more negative connotations than the original Chinese would warrant. Over two millennia ago Cicero was wise to warn us that *'Care should also be taken not to transfer tropes from one language into another'* (Curtis, 1940, p. 291).

Underspecification is present in metaphors and connotations because they pack a whole story into a very few words. As just illustrated, these stories-in-a-capsule usually include a value-judgement. In Emily Dickinson's poem cited above, we find several interconnected metaphors involving light; the already encountered LIGHT is VISIBILITY, an additional TRUTH is LIGHT and its spin-off KNOWLEDGE is ILLUMINATION. Dickinson, like Deng, decides to overturn the conventional judgment that being able to see (or be seen) is good, and that gaining knowledge is invariably advantageous, suggesting instead that excessive light may be blinding. Hence her call for the poet to tell the truth indirectly. It is worth noting however that whereas our first reading of the term *blinding* may be that it is *too much of a good thing*, perhaps eliciting the implication that the human frame is too fragile to withstand epiphany, an alternative reading is that the full truth may be so *blindingly obvious* that it leaves nothing to the imagination, and therefore fails to engage us meaningfully. Once again, the inherent underspecification of metaphors generates ambiguity.

Since metaphors have the power to frame events, they also have the power to make us judge those events, and that power seems to be enhanced for being implicit and suggestive, rather that explicit and didactic. Even seemingly dead metaphors, as in the *roadmap* to peace, may conceal a still active component encapsulated in the associated belief that *where there is a will, there is a way*. If no way forward has been found, it is because there has been insufficient will – a perception which has led to the adoption of the alternative term *peace process* in relation to the Israel-Palestine conflict. Metaphors turn out to be double-edged swords. Their ability to frame and explain events convincingly can make it difficult for people to conceptualise those same events differently. And because subliminal persuasion works by appealing directly to our gut and bypasses our critical

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scrutiny, we tend to become partisan to certain metaphors and their associated values. This is an advantage to those whose metaphors dominate a particular discourse, but a disadvantage – and therefore a challenge – to those who want to contest and replace that dominant frame (Lakoff, 2002). I discuss further examples in the pre-emptive compounds cited in *2.4 Neologisms*.

2.4 Gaps

Ambiguity and metaphors are not the only form of underspecification. Parataxis, the juxtapositions of phrases and sentences with no indication of the link between them, is a rhetorical device that invites us to jump over the gap by inferring plausible connections. Imagists' poems and haiku are poetic forms which capitalise on parataxis, as illustrated by Ezra Pound's *In a station of the metro* (Pound, 1913):

'The apparition of these faces in the crowd; Petals on a wet, black bough.'

In this example, the gap will most likely be filled by a comparison. In other cases, it may be filled by a contrast, for example, *two's company, three's a crowd*, by sequence, *Veni Vidi Vici,* by causality, *waste not; want not*, by conditionality, *never venture; never gain*, and in the case of this implied concessive *have children, will travel*, by bloody-minded determination!

Sometimes, one and the same sentence may convey all these different meanings and more, irony included. This is the case with some poetic refrains where the wording of the preceding stanza (or one might say the gap between text and refrain) primes the reader for an altered interpretation (see, for example, Giroux, 1980).

Poems, proverbs, mottos and in many cases, captions, are just a few examples of juxtapositions being used in order to invest the resulting gaps with multiple possible meanings for readers to fill as is their wont. We combine contextual clues with our knowledge of the world to infer the most likely intended meaning. Context can thus be manipulated both to suggest a link where none exists or to suggest a misleading link. Parataxis was used repeatedly by President George W. Bush in the countdown to the invasion of Iraq, as illustrated by this example (Bush, 2004).

'We knew Saddam Hussein's record of aggression and support for terror. We knew his long history of pursuing, even using, weapons of mass destruction. And we know that September the

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11th requires our country to think differently.'

The tricolon of *'we knew ... we knew'* and *'we know'* pastes over the disconnect between Saddam Hussein and September 11, inviting many people to surmise that Saddam Hussein was responsible for the 9/11 terrorist attacks.

The use of parataxis in non-sequiturs in dodging the question and in reframing the issue, brings this rhetorical device to the attention of the media and feeds a popular distrust of those who use it. Yet the device itself is not unique to a particular profession, nor is it only ever used in order to manipulate or mislead. Gaps, pauses, silences and other pregnant intervals between utterances, as the playwright Harold Pinter has illustrated, are there to be filled, whether we are invited to or not, because we seem to be cognitively wired to do so (Billington, 2007).

2.5 Neologisms

Our drive to make sense of silence and slippages in any given context is further illustrated by the way in which we interpret – and create – novel expressions. When the poet Dylan Thomas coined the collocation *'a grief ago',* he bent conventions of usage by inserting a term of emotion into a construction that normally holds a measure of time (*a moment ago, a decade ago*). Rather than dismiss the coinage, we invest it with a heightened meaning.

The term *soft power* similarly benefits from surprising us into a novel awareness. For some, *soft power* is a contradiction in terms which makes so little sense that it cannot even be translated into other languages without eliciting a risible oxymoron of impotency coupled with potency. However, as Shakespeare illustrated in *Romeo and Juliet*, oxymora can be very meaningful and evocative, and this is especially the case where the resulting compound fits into a paradigm of similarly constructed terms.

In the case of s*oft drink, soft porn, soft subject, soft rules* and other compounds involving the modifier *soft*, they have all come to acquire the connotations of a non-harmful variant of the term being modified. The term to *sex up* similarly fits into an already existing paradigm of phrasal verbs in English with the structure to VERB-*up*, such as to *beef up, dress up,* and *man up*. In the context of the Iraq Dossier, a document produced by the Blair administration justifying invasion in the run-up to the Iraq war in 2003, the ambiguity inherent in this neologism became the object of an enquiry; had the government sexed up the contents in the sense of putting a positive spin on fact or in the sense of implanting false facts? (Scott, 2004).
Our knowledge of language and our inferences about intended meaning allow us to make sense of novel collocations, and maybe even to adopt a coinage as a new catch phrase, whether its source was poetry or diplomacy. What is important is not

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so much how novel accoutrements in language (Dr Johnson's *dress of thought*) become fashionable, but how these may in turn fashion our thoughts.

For instance, the use of the modifier *smart in compounds* such as *smart power, smartphone, smart remote, smart housing,* and *smart city*, would have us believe that the relevant product is the smartest option, since the alternative is by contrast probably *stupid*.

The same holds for any compound term in which the modifier carries positive connotations, for example *constructive ambiguity, a just war, enlightened self-interest, the worthy poor, good cholesterol*. These compounds are word-level pre-emptive arguments which tacitly defuse the negative connotations associated with the head noun by means of the positive connotations associated with the modifier. There is no argument involved here, just assertion, and depending on the authority making the assertion, newly minted compounds may be more or less persuasive. Thus, the *new normal*, a current term used to describe President Trump's unprecedented style of government may (mis)lead us to believe that what is normal is natural and acceptable (Flake, 2017).

The examples provided so far illustrate how ambiguity, metaphors, connotations, gaps and neologisms may all give rise to multiple interpretations. They also demonstrate that the linguistic devices in question are equally available to both poetry and diplomacy. Our focus therefore shifts, in the next section, to *why* each profession uses them: are there significant differences in the images of poetry and diplomacy?

3. THOUGHT

The driving objective of diplomacy is security; securing peace (or in case of war, terms of engagement), securing territorial integrity, securing agreements, securing information (both in the sense of obtaining and defending), and ultimately, securing a country's best interests. Where conflicts arise between interests, or where concerns transcend national boundaries, diplomats are tasked with seeking compromise and counterbalance, where possible though inclusive (win-win) solutions.

Among the many objectives ascribed to poetry are wooing, eulogising, commemorating, serving as a collective repertoire (especially where song is

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concerned), and promoting social bonding through the reinforcement of communal values and beliefs. In addition to these community-building aims, poetry is also seen as a private musing, as an expression of idiolect, of idiosyncrasy, and as an individual's recalibration of the dominant order. In all these cases, poetry manifests a delight in language and serves as an instrument of thought, but in none of them does it have as its primary objective to secure or even to change anything.

As the poet W. H. Auden (1940) said, poetry makes nothing happen, and as President Kennedy urged, *'Society must set the artist free to follow his vision wherever it takes him'* (Kennedy, 1963).

These differences in aims have implications for accountability. Whereas the poet's calling is to remain true to himself and creatively free, the diplomat's primary responsibility is to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and home government. For the poet, being socially engaged, negotiating and renegotiating meaning, values and allegiances are all options, but responsibilities are not. Indeed, the poet can best *speak truth* to power when speaking from a non-partisan position. Diplomats speak for their country at all times regardless of their own inclinations or reservations. However, although they are spokespeople, they nevertheless have the freedom to choose how best to express themselves.

Beyond this fundamental difference lie others. Regarding target audience, contemporary poetry is increasingly private whereas diplomacy is increasingly public. This has consequences for their relative sphere of influence, with poetry exerting leverage over a self-selected few, and diplomacy affecting the lives of all. Diplomacy is discussed in the news daily, poetry rarely. We even find differences in the area of commonality established above, namely underspecification. The remainder of this section considers possible reasons for *'telling it slant'* and evaluates their relevance to poetry and diplomacy.

Among the many reasons for resorting to implicit communication are tact and politeness. We often avoid telling the whole truth in order not to cause offence, or we justify white lies in order to protect feelings. The language of diplomats epitomises these concerns for face: no professional diplomat would consider breaking with codes of politeness or conventions of interaction, unless it were for the purpose of signalling. The very term to be diplomatic as applied to the man in the street refers to those self-same attributes of soft-spoken non-committal consideration that characterise the profession. By contrast, poets often challenge social conventions and are rarely shy of causing offence or breaking taboos. The truth they speak is intended to be unsettling. Even Dickinson's injunction not to tell the whole truth is unsettling in its contravention of accepted belief.

Another reason for not saying things explicitly is plausible deniability: we can deny having communicated a message if we 'never said' the words themselves. Thus, President George W. Bush may legitimately claim that he never said Saddam Hussein was responsible for 9/11, just as the Chinese government can honestly refute accusations of biding their time to overthrow the U.S. as global superpower. For the poet, in contrast, implicit messaging is all about inviting multiple interpretations and encouraging diverse readings, none of which need to be denied. Indeed, much of the power of literature resides in the life a work takes on beyond the author's initial creation.

A third reason for not speaking openly is a desire to keep one's options open, to buy time and secure room for manoeuvre. Ambiguity in diplomacy is said to be constructive precisely when it achieves these goals, and the One China policy cited above is a case in point, though it should be noted that unresolved geopolitical conflicts may fester rather than disappear over time, no matter how much leeway ambiguous language affords in the present. Since poets tend to work within the temporal confines of a single poem, they have no need for buying time. In so far as they want to keep their options open at all, it is in order to create suspense in any given poem.

A related reason for not divulging one's position is

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to find out more about the other party without giving too much away about oneself. This kind of behaviour presupposes a win-lose dynamic, something which may arise in diplomacy but never in poetry. The American reaction to China's *taoguang yanghui* policy was typical of this win-lose mentality.

Given this run of divergent reasons for resorting to implicit communication, we might justifiably wonder whether there are any common motives for poets and diplomats to use the unsaid. Three come to mind, involving persuasion, community building, and values.

One of the great strengths of understated communication is that it helps to elicit insights and conclusions rather than dictate them, thus enabling interlocutors to take ownership of the positions they have been nudged towards. Both poetry and diplomacy make an art of leading the other party to desired conclusions. The Latin adage *'Ars poetica est non omnia dicere'*, which translates as 'the art of poetry is not to say

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everything' echoes a witty definition of diplomacy as *'the art of letting others have things your way*.'

The examples analysed in the preceding section all demonstrate how persuasion depends on attraction rather than coercion, and how attraction works best when it engages both heart and mind through the imagination. This shared tendency to persuade through attraction does not mean, however, that the same audiences are in question, nor that they are being persuaded for the same reasons. As mentioned above, diplomats are tasked with persuading their counterparts of what is often a prescribed message, whereas poets are not spokesmen and have no predetermined audience.

Secondly, the unsaid is central to creating a feeling of community through shared conventions. The expression *to speak the same language* refers in large part to that sense of solidarity that comes from understanding each other without having to explain ourselves, and that includes being in on all those allusions, connotations, implications, presuppositions, assumptions, frames of reference, value systems and other markers of culture that constitute tacit understanding. Diplomats and poets each represent their own communities, allowing for possible sub-communities, and each community builds up a sense of belonging and self-worth through speaking the same language (Tajfel & Turner, 1986).

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The fact that both poets and diplomats depend on the artful deployment of language for their living may explain why implicit communication plays such a central role in both these professional communities. Being a wordsmith entails a mastery not only of what is said explicitly, but also an understanding of what has been implied, of the meaning that has been *folded into* the layers of language, as the etymology of *imply* explains (Latin *implicare* meaning to *fold in, entwine*). Yet this shared linguistic proficiency does not mean that its practitioners necessarily belong to the same community, with shared values, beliefs or objectives.

A final reason for resorting to underspecification has to do with what I refer to as *value-speak*. This is the appeal to often hidden values in order to influence people. We saw several examples involving metaphors and connotations. Both poets and diplomats see values as potential game changers, but whereas poets often question values by challenging received wisdom, diplomats tend

to embody and enact the values of the country they represent. In this respect, poetry and diplomacy differ with regard to function, flexibility and creativity.

However, these same attributes come back into play when the diplomat is faced with a negotiation impasse. Where agreement cannot be reached in the here and now because the gulf between positions is too great, shared values may offer a bridge. This is because values, in being both aspirational and abstract, can give players something to agree on (we all want a better world for our children), while avoiding the charge of having compromised their cause by reaching a compromise. Recasting the narrative of deadlocked negotiations in order to find common values is an art that resembles poetry both in its questioning of the dominant order and in its ability to imagine an alternative one. Here, finally, we find a convincing common denominator between poetry and diplomacy.

To summarise the argument so far, we find ourselves with something of a paradox with regard to Dr Johnson's claim that *'Language is the dress of thought'*. The first section on *Language* concluded that both poets and diplomats demonstrate a mastery of a distinctive and demanding area of language: implicit communication. Their *'dress'*, therefore, is similarly recherché. Yet in the second section on *'Thought'* we showed that each profession resorts to the unsaid for significantly different reasons. If we are to retain the terms of Dr Johnson's metaphor, then we might say that there is a coincidence of dress involved: one and the same attire is being worn by two very different professions. Since coincidence and ambiguity are naturally occurring phenomena, we could leave it at that. However, as I hope to demonstrate in the final section, if we look beyond differences in professional aims and practice, we find that there are indeed commonalities in outlook that justify drawing a very close connection between poetry and diplomacy. The key to this connection involves values, ambivalence and the power of redress.

4. DRESS AND REDRESS

Dr Johnson's adage about language being the dress of thought is a variant of Cicero's original claim (Curtis, 1940, p. 291):

'. . .as garments were first invented from necessity, to secure us from the injuries of the weather, but improved afterwards for ornament and distinction; so the poverty of language first introduced tropes, which were afterwards increased for delight.'

Ambiguity, parataxis, neologisms, metaphor and many other rhetorical devices used in implicit communication all qualify as tropes, or figures of speech. The word *trope* itself means *turn, manner* or *style*. Cicero clearly believes that tropes exist for

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delight, claiming that *'a moderate use of tropes, justly applied, beautifies and enlivens a discourse'* but warns that *'an excess of them causes obscurity'*. This description provides us with an explanation for the observation made at the outset of this article that poetry is often considered difficult, and diplomacy duplicitous, because the language they use is so ambiguous. Cicero accounts for our reaction of distrust by explaining that tropes *'are not the ordinary dress of our thoughts, but a foreign habit; and therefore he who fills his discourse with a continued series of them, acts like one who appears in public in a strange dress'* (Curtis, 1940, p. 291). Dr Johnson's preoccupation is less with strangeness of dress than with ill-fitting and inappropriate dress, propriety being determined primarily by class concerns (Curtis, 1940, p. 291):

'Language is the dress of thought; and as the noblest mien or most graceful action would be degraded and obscured by a garb appropriated to the gross employments of rusticks or mechanics, so the most heroic sentiments will lose their efficacy, and the most splendid ideas drop their magnificence, if they are conveyed by words used commonly upon low and trivial occasions, debased by vulgar mouths, and contaminated by inelegant applications'.

Both these elaborations on the analogy *'language is to thought what dress is to the body/occupation'*

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are helpful in that they show, first, how any given trope may elicit a number of different interpretations, and second, how each interpretation is informed by the concerns of its proponent, a concern often expressed through an implicit value judgment. I would like to propose my own interpretation of the LANGUAGE is DRESS metaphor, informed by my preoccupation with telling it slant. The reason that the language of poets and diplomats is so similar despite their aims being so different is, I suggest, because ambivalence is central to both pursuits. By this I mean that ambivalence does not only characterise the way of thinking of both these professions, but it is also of central importance to each of them because it is the catalyst for redress.

Ambivalence is the state of experiencing two opposing thoughts or feelings simultaneously with equal force. The connotations of the term ambivalence are largely negative, suggesting indecision, vacillation, contradiction, inner conflict and by extension, unreliability. Yet the ability to encompass two (*ambi*) strengths (*valence*)

is not necessarily a setback, quite the contrary. As Scott Fitzgerald explains (Fitzgerald, 2017):

'The test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposed ideas in mind at the same time and still retain the ability to function. One should, for example, be able to see that things are hopeless and yet be determined to make them otherwise'.

Poets retain the ability to write while holding in mind all the strands of meaning they want to develop. Poetry lovers similarly retain the ability to read and understand multiple meanings as these evolve simultaneously. Many poets retain the ability to continue writing while nevertheless questioning whether their doing so serves any purpose. An equivalent ambivalence characterises sundry other human endeavours, diplomacy included, or perhaps diplomacy above all, for it is diplomats who most often find themselves in situations that seem hopeless but who nevertheless retain their resolve to redress them. Thus, to dismiss our ability to hold opposing forces in mind as a weakness rather than a strength is to be misled by the connotations of the term *ambivalence*. We may change the term and replace it with *constructive ambivalence* or *equanimity* for instance, but we should not throw out the baby with the bathwater.

Where does redress come into this discussion of ambivalence? The verb to *redress* means to set right something that has gone awry, such as to make good a wrong, or remedy an injustice. Diplomacy, it could be argued, is all about retaining the ability to function while entertaining opposing ideas, where those opposing ideas represent the contradictory positions and conflicting demands of parties set on protecting or redressing their interests. The diplomat can best negotiate impasses by holding multiple possibilities in mind, not by taking sides, ignoring requests or excluding concerns.

This balancing act, in turn, involves using a form of language that is inclusive and that accommodates shades of meaning, perhaps even opposing meanings. Hence the central role of underspecification in diplomatic discourse. However, the diplomat cannot only ever be ambiguous or vague. Ambivalence ultimately has to resolve itself into effective action and to achieve this the diplomat must develop acumen – diplomatic acumen regarding what to say, when and how, and political acumen regarding whether to act (or react) at all.

Although the poet does not require political acumen, and is not required to act in any way other than to write, redress is also central to poetic endeavour. In his book *The Redress of Poetry* (Heaney, 2002), and in his Nobel acceptance-speech *Crediting Poetry* (Heaney, 1995), the Irish poet Seamus Heaney defines redress as the creative process of imagining a counterbalance to

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anomalies and potential injustices in the status quo. Redress, for Heaney, has a restorative power that works through words and imagination, rather than actions. These life-changing words are most powerful not when we polarise and take sides or, in Heaney's words, when we *'get hurt and get hard'*, but when we manage to encompass potentially conflicting realities; when we achieve the improbable feat of making *'hope and history rhyme'* (Heaney, 1991).

Human beings suffer,
They torture one another,
They get hurt and get hard.
...
History says. Don't hope
On this side of the grave.
But then, once in a lifetime
The longed-for tidal wave
Of justice can rise up.
And hope and history rhyme.
So hope for a great sea-change
On the far side of revenge.
Believe that a further shore
Is reachable from here.

To reach a further shore from here is to negotiate the gap that lies between these two seemingly incommensurate positions. For this to be possible, we have to assign equal force to both sides (*ambivalence*), and give them equal heed or animus (*equanimity*). And the best way to do that is not to adopt a final vocabulary, or to insist on clear writing, but where appropriate to resort to underspecification, with all the potential for multiple and inclusive meanings that come with it.

Thus, if hope and history are ever to rhyme, when they so clearly do not according to the narrow definition of rhyme as a correspondence between sounds, we have to mine all the other possible meanings of the word, from its etymological connections to rhythm and flow, to its metaphorical extension from a harmony of sounds to a harmony of meaning, and finally to its complementary pairing with reason in the expression *rhyme or reason*.

The poet W. H. Auden comes to a similar conclusion regarding the relationship between ambivalence and ambiguity when he says *'To be useful to an artist a general idea must be capable of including the most contradictory experiences, and of the subtlest variation and ironic interpretations'* (Mendelson, 2002, p. 421). Auden goes on to argue that *'subtlety and irony are drawbacks'* in political discourse because politics seeks to *'secure unanimity in action'*.

5. CONCLUSION

We are not short of examples of populist politicians and extreme ideologies (whether on the right or left) dismissing debate the better to polarise positions and delegitimise dissent. But

diplomats are not politicians. Despite my earlier characterisation of diplomats as spokesmen who all sing from the same sheet, a diplomat has to deliver on many different tasks, some of which require a skill set which resembles that of a poet in both turn of mind and turn of phrase. This is particularly the case when diplomats are engaged in negotiation – perhaps not in multilateral fora where the demands of unanimity tend to erode language, but definitely so in mediation and other subtler forms of persuasion. At the height of their game, both poets and diplomats are able to envisage alternative configurations that have the power to redress existing injustices and impasses. More often than not, these alternatives are best expressed by *'telling it slant'*.

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